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## Sarah T. Phillips, This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal

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**Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal***

sion of a much larger study. Thus, some sections read more like conclusions than analysis. Regardless, for a reader specifically interested in the subject, *Integrated River Basin Management Through Decentralization* provides a well-categorized look at decentralized water management across several continents.

Zachary Smith

**Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal*, Cambridge University Press (2007) (2007); 310 pp; \$23.99; ISBN-13: 978-0-521-61796-3; soft cover.**

*This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* navigates through the New Deal's extensive acronyms and presents a comprehensive study of federal conservation policies throughout this historical era. Author Sarah T. Phillips is Assistant Professor of History at Columbia University in New York City.

Phillips interweaves environmental and political history while charting the course of New Deal conservation policies. A statement from a 1937 documentary, *The River*, sums up the New Dealers' attitude toward conservation: "Poor land makes poor people, and poor people make poor land." This belief served as the driving force behind conservation policies, as policy analysts saw a link between the Great Depression and the poor state of rural Americans. Accordingly, helping rehabilitate the lives of the rural poor would in turn lift the United States out of the Great Depression. However, farmers' resistance to some measures, problems in assisting the poorest farmers, and the outbreak of World War II further complicated an already difficult task. Phillips analyzes these policies over the course of multiple presidencies and historical events. The epilogue examines the international export of these conservation policies.

Chapter 1, "The New Conservation," traces the origins of rural conservation policy. Future president and then New York governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt's concern for a "proper balance" between rural and urban communities in a June 1931 speech reflected the importance of conservation to the eventual New Deal architect. Achieving this balance was the goal of new conservationists, and the groundwork for later New Deal programs came about during the presidency of Herbert Hoover. Phillips cites two distinct schools of thought coming together to form the new conservationist policies: rural electrification advocates and land use planners. These groups focused on providing electricity to rural areas and land degradation, respectively, and both groups linked social improvement with environmental policy. President Hoover's policy initiatives clashed with those of the new conservationists. President Hoover also sought cheap power and proper land use, but sought these results through "industrial organization and private cooperation." This goal was at odds with the new conservationists,

who saw a direct link between the Great Depression and rural issues. This disagreement set the stage for President Roosevelt, who shared the views of the new conservationists and sought to implement them in his new administration.

Chapter 2, "Poor People, Poor Land," looks at the New Deal conservation programs in depth. At the beginning of his presidency, President Roosevelt passed five sweeping laws, which provided the bedrock programs for New Deal conservation policy: the Agricultural Adjustment Act ("AAA"), the Civilian Conservation Corps ("CCC"), the Federal Emergency Relief Act ("FERA"), the National Industrial Recovery Act ("NIRA"), and the Tennessee Valley Authority ("TVA"). The AAA focused on production control, while the CCC created work groups that created land use demonstrations for farmers and restored lands. NIRA created the Public Works Administration ("PWA"), a \$3.3 billion agency that built hydroelectric dams, coordinated soil conservation work, and purchased sub-marginal lands. The TVA was a government corporation that essentially applied the new conservation policies and theories to the poverty-stricken Tennessee Valley. Phillips focuses heavily on the TVA and portrays the program as a regional test for the nationwide implementation of the New Deal programs. The TVA encouraged the formation of cooperatives and small farm-based enterprises. For these businesses, cheap electricity was important. Accordingly, the TVA built massive dams along the Tennessee River for generating hydroelectric power. The TVA offered low rates that allowed for rapid expansion and, through the sale of low-cost appliances, increased consumption. While the TVA assisted many rural people in equalizing their balance with city dwellers, the program was still unable to help the poorest farmers and land tenants in the area.

Meanwhile, the federal government conducted other experiments in conservation policy elsewhere. Foremost of these involved using land utilization projects to relieve rural distress. Under these programs, FERA purchased sub-marginal land and converted it into agricultural rehabilitation sites, recreational parks, wildlife preserves, or Native American projects. These projects gave rise to rural rehabilitation projects, which tried to provide self-support to farmers through planned rural communities. FERA initiated this program and constructed twenty-eight projects primarily in the South, Dakotas, and Nebraska. Some of these planned communities focused strictly on farming, while others expanded into community and industrial planning. Like the TVA's programs, these programs tried to strike the proper balance between rural and urban living but still could not provide for the poorest rural residents.

These programs led to the federal government's establishment of the Resettlement Administration ("RA") in an effort to get these projects under the jurisdiction of a single agency. The RA had "the authority to purchase land, to undertake conservation and land resto-

ration projects, to build resettlement communities, and to make rural rehabilitation loans.” The RA purchased millions of acres of land throughout the western United States. Farmers who wanted to remain on the land and continue farming resisted this. In late 1936, the release of a report entitled *The Future of the Great Plains* created a shift in conservation strategy and spelled the end of government land acquisition and farmer resettlement.

Chapter 3, “The Best New Dealer in Texas,” features President Lyndon B. Johnson and examines the transformation of rural farmers from a producing to a consuming class. Professor Phillips credits President Johnson for taking New Deal conservation policies and directing “them toward an industrial future.” This chapter follows President Johnson from his beginnings as a schoolteacher in the Hill Country of central Texas, to Capital Hill as a U.S. Representative, to the White House. The land of the Hill Country was an important part of President Johnson’s upbringing because his father was a farmer. However, floods and droughts put the family deep in debt. Phillips cites these experiences as the driving force behind President Johnson’s concern for agricultural policy as president.

Johnson bypassed state politics and sought local assistance and reform through federal legislation and programs. As an example, Phillips highlights Johnson’s involvement with the development of the lower Colorado River. The Texas legislature established the Lower Colorado River Authority (“LCRA”) through the work of a local attorney named Alvin Wirtz and U.S. Representative James B. Buchanan. LCRA planned four dam projects along the Colorado River for producing hydroelectric power. Private power companies fiercely resisted these dams. However, the construction of the dams moved forward with assistance from the PWA and the Supreme Court. Representative Buchanan died of a heart attack during this period. Johnson won this seat by running on a platform of support for President Roosevelt and rural relief and redevelopment.

Representative Johnson worked feverishly in support of LCRA and secured \$5 million in his first term. LCRA eventually finished the dams and the hydroelectric power systems came online. However, Johnson, learning from the TVA’s experience, declined to sell this power to private companies and instead constructed rural power lines in an effort to electrify these areas. Johnson convinced many rural groups to form cooperatives for power distribution. Moreover, Johnson successfully negotiated with Texas Power & Light, the major private utility provider, to sell the company surplus power. This rural electrification project was a major success, as Professor Phillips shows in a chart delineating the increased percentage of farms in Johnson’s district with electricity over a ten-year period.

World War II changed the direction of LCRA, as cheap electricity attracted industries to rural areas. Johnson seized this opportunity by

bringing numerous plants, industries, and military facilities to Texas. According to Phillips, the war convinced Johnson “that a growing industrial sector could provide new jobs while farms and ranches became more productive.”

Accordingly, Representative Johnson’s work for his district and the Hill Country was representative of New Dealers’ role in conservation. Phillips sums up this view as follows: “dams impounded the water that prevented the floods and invited the tourists, and in the process of doing so transmitted electricity to the farmers who worked with the dams to hold the topsoil in place.” However, the transition to industrial development repeated itself throughout the country, as Phillips shows in the final chapter.

Chapter 4, “The Industrial Transition,” focuses on the role of World War II in transforming rural resource policies. Phillips continually mentions the failure of New Deal conservation policies to lift up “marginal farmers,” and finally New Dealers began to look to industry as a way to help these rural citizens. Accordingly, factory jobs and multi-use river projects became the answer to the “marginal” farmer question, and the war provided an opportunity to “test these new assumptions.”

The war demanded all-out production and rendered efficiency more important than sustainability. The war also brought high prices and prosperity for farmers. However, this prosperity found its way to only large farmers, represented by the Farm Bureau. The Farm Security Administration (“FSA”) lobbied on behalf of smaller farmers, but “it became difficult to sustain agrarian policies that supported small or self-sufficient producers in the new wartime production environment.” In the words of a Farm Bureau lobbyist, small farmers “could help the war effort more by going to work in the war industry or for more efficient farmers . . . .” Thus, marginal farmers began turning to industrial employment. Moreover, the war required a production method that undercut conservation efforts, controlled productions, and rural rehabilitation program.

Against this backdrop, industry prevailed over the maintenance of small farms and conservation policy no longer retained an agricultural focus. As Phillips puts it: “What emerged from the war was a model of rural resource development that put more emphasis on encouraging agricultural out-migration than on sustaining smaller farms, maintaining rural populations, or requiring soil conservation districts to implement measures that might limit farm incomes.” However, despite this outcome Phillips argues that New Deal conservation policies produced positive environmental change in the form of rehabilitated landscapes and forests.

The epilogue, “Exporting the New Deal,” examines the worldwide influence of these New Deal conservation ideas. These ideas factored into post-World War II rebuilding and the Cold War in places such as

Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. However, like their domestic counterparts, many of these projects encountered tensions between industrialism and agrarian polices. Industry prevailed in this struggle, as well. Phillips argues that industry triumphed for the same reasons it happened in the United States: countries sought the prosperity associated with industry and had little interest in conservation programs designed to help poor rural populations.

*This Land, This Nation* is a fascinating, yet difficult, study. The numerous acronyms and players involved in New Deal conservation policies can make the book difficult to follow at times. Accordingly, Phillips is most clear in Chapter 3, which uses President Johnson as a main character and traces the history of recovery and reform with his early career in Washington. This approach gives the reader a main character to focus on and provides for a better understanding of the evolution of New Deal conservation policies and attitudes. Additionally, linking this evolution with Johnson and historical events clarifies the underlying causes of such policies. In the end, Phillips has produced a thorough and enlightening portrait of the New Deal using a different lens than most other New Deal histories. *This Land, This Nation* is a great resource for those interested in historical environmental policy; more importantly, this book is a requirement for those interested in future environmental policies as it offers a chance to learn from the successes and shortcomings of the past.

*Matt Larson*

**Maude Barlow, *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*, The New Press (2008); 196 pp; \$24.95; ISBN 1595581863, hard cover.**

In *Blue Covenant*, Right Livelihood Award-winner Maude Barlow provides insight into the issues surrounding global freshwater. The book depicts the problems with privatization of water, and the emerging technologies designed to “reuse” water. *Blue Covenant* focuses on how grassroots movements have fought off privatization and demanded that government treat water as a basic human right, and not a freely traded commodity.

Chapter one, *Where Has All the Water Gone*, describes the most pressing issues facing global water as a resource. It begins by outlining three disastrous scenarios that the world faces unless we as a planet change course. The theme of immediacy expressed by the scenarios carries throughout the book: Scenario 1, the world is running out of freshwater; Scenario 2, every day more and more people are living without access to clean water; and Scenario 3, a powerful corporate water cartel has emerged to seize control of every aspect of water for its own profit. The third scenario exacerbates the problems unfolding in the first two scenarios.