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Review: Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of America's Wetlands

By Ann Vileisis

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Ann Vileisis. *Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of America's Wetlands*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999. 433 pp. ISBN:1-55963-314-X (cloth); 1-55963-315-8 (paper). US\$29.95 cloth; US\$19.95 paper.

When the Puritans arrived in America they found its chaotic landscape of swamps incomprehensible after the orderliness of the English countryside. Swamps became seen as sinister places, in which the sinful Indians' familiarity was a sign that this new landscape was evil. A similar set of beliefs was developed in the south where the coastal plain swamps presented even greater challenges. Taming the chaotic landscapes of wetlands became a religious duty to create Christian order for public service and commercial gain. Timber, furs, and agriculture meant the economic exploitation of the wetlands' resources. The rich soils of the newly drained wetlands saw the rise of a remarkable agricultural productivity. This great familiarity with swamplands saw a causal link between wetlands and disease, in which cultivation unleashed the miasmatic gases that caused outbreaks of yellow fever and malaria.

The ballad of the "The Lake of Dismal Swamp" was written in 1803 by the Irish poet Thomas Moore, a man who had become crazed when the woman he loved had died, and went off into the Dismal Swamp to find her. This image of a place of fear and dread changed as the wealth of the former wetlands began to be exploited. This change in mood was captured in the writing and paintings of 19th century travellers such as Henry David Thoreau. In June 1840 Thoreau recorded his experiences on the Mississippi, which he saw as a metaphor for the vitality and exuberance of life, in a landscape that was evidence of divine creation. His essays were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862, describing the swamp as a sacred place. T. Addison Richards' *Romantic Landscapes* of 1855 held a new fascination for the intrepid traveller.

The Romantics' regret for the loss of pristine places inspired an interest in the enduring wetlands as a place where one could get to know God's creation first hand. Romanticism in America challenged the longstanding tradition of regarding swamps as worthless real estate. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), wrote *Dred, A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856), using the landscape as a physical and

allegorical backdrop for her anti-slavery novel. Stowe's swamplands represented indolence and chaos that threatened the Northern states' industriousness and morality. For the South, swamplands had aroused a fear of slave uprisings since the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831. In September 1856, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* published the adventures of David Hunter Strother in Virginia's Dismal Swamp, in which this exotic landscape no longer threatened, but was an intriguing place of great beauty.

Martin Johnson Heade began painting the expansive salt marshes of the Atlantic coast in 1860; the first to do so for the landscape's own sake. Heade saw a balanced relationship between people and the natural world. He completed over a hundred marsh paintings before his death at age eighty-four. The writer and illustrator A.R. Waud conveyed memorable visual images of the Louisiana Cypress Swamp in *Harper's Weekly* of December 8, 1866. Waud's cypress forest with its Spanish moss, decaying tree trunks, and lily pads portrayed the new image of swamp landscape to an American audience recovering from the horrors of the Civil War. Swamp adventures began to appear in a great variety of popular women's magazines such as the *Ladies' Magazine of Literature and Fashion and Fine Arts*, telling the reader that the swamp was no longer a place where a lady should not enter. By the late 19th century, American writers and their audiences had come to consider the wetlands as a place of curiosity and intrigue.

In the 1950s a new word entered the American vernacular-*wetlands*-which had grown from the recent history of legislation and popular interest in this landscape. In 1957 Olga Owen Huckins wrote in horror about the sight of dozens of birds poisoned by the town's aerial spraying of wetlands with DDT. Her friend, on reading the letter, became shocked and so outraged that she turned her expertise to the monumental problem. That friend was Rachel Carson, and her findings were published in 1962 as *Silent Spring*. Her books inspired countless Americans to demand greater attention to environmental and health responsibilities from big government and big business. Over the next four decades huge sums were spent on gaining a greater understanding of how the wetland ecosystems function to reduce pollution, reduce flooding and provide a habitat for fish, waterfowl and wildlife. Any change to this ecosystem reverberates across the landscape. By the 1980s some 53% of America's wetlands had been converted to agriculture or development.

Vileisis's history portrays how the role of cultural attitudes, the misunderstanding of wetlands, and the waxing involvement of government has played such a tragic part in the loss of huge areas of swamplands to industrial estates and farmlands. Each year 117,000 acres of wetlands are lost to economic development, the result of the lawmakers' inexperience and lack of knowledge regarding these ecosystems. Understanding the

complexity of cultural beliefs will aid in saving what is left of America's great wetlands for prosperity and the long-term benefit of its people.

The achievement of Vileisis's highly admirable book is her excellent combination of a history of legislation with the image and portrayal of American. I first became aware of America's great wetlands through reading Walt Disney comics as a child. Donald Duck and his three nephews would head off for adventure into the Dismal Swamp or the Everglades, and find a world of great beauty and tranquillity that also held some mystery and danger. This dichotomy of natural beauty and a great fear of wetlands was portrayed in films such as *Southern Comfort* (1981), and has been part of American popular culture since the 19th century. It is this awareness of the interplay between popular culture and a history of legislation that makes *Discovering the Unknown Landscape* such a great joy to read. The general public or the professional environmentalist will find much to mull over and become enlightened by. By the end of reading Vileisis's work, one only wishes that there was more on the history of how the American Indians viewed this landscape, and how this same landscape affects contemporary popular culture. I can recommend this book to all those with an interest in America's wilderness.

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