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Peer reviewed

Review: Nature and the City: Making Environmental Policy in Toronto and Los Angeles

By Gene Desfor and Roger Keil

Reviewed by [Ryder W. Miller](#)
San Francisco, USA

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Gene Desfor and Roger Keil. *Nature and the City: Making Environmental Policy in Toronto and Los Angeles*. (Society, Environment, and Place: Series Editors: Andrew Kirby and Janice Monk) Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004. 275 pp. ISBN: 0-8165-2373-8. US\$45.00 (trade cloth) . Alkaline paper.

York University professors Gene Desfor and Roger Keil look back to the 1990s, a time during which ecological modernization, which sought to satisfactorily manage nature/ecology within the urban framework, emerged. Though global in perspective, the work is focusing on environmental case studies in Toronto and Los Angeles.

The four case studies included are: "Civic Environmentalism: The Don River in Toronto," "Controlling and Concreting Nature versus Civil Renaturalization: The Los Angeles River," "Contested and Polluted Terrain: Soil Remediation in Toronto" and "Seeing the Air We Breathe? Air Quality Management in Los Angeles." The authors also provide comparative analysis and interpretation of the cases involved. River is compared to river, city to city, air pollution to soil pollution, and river pollution to soil and air pollution.

The case studies are presented as stories told in a reflective and erudite way. One may need a dictionary or access to the Internet to do some of the background research necessary to understand the scenarios presented, since the book is guided by urban regulation theory, urban regime theory, and discourse-based analysis. Each sentence is a gem of complicated reasoning and sophisticated explication, but the work is understandable nonetheless. The work is highly referenced and dense and tells four fascinating convoluted stories.

Los Angeles is presented as a city with a lot of urban sprawl, potential natural disasters, and geographic conditions that create an atmospheric inversion layer that retains smog. The Los Angeles River has been managed to prevent erosion and flooding. Local players have succeeded in improving the environmental situation there, but environmental justice activists have not been satisfied with all the outcomes. Surprisingly missing is reference to Hollywood's involvement in these environmental struggles.

Toronto, the financial center of Canada, is a "donut city" with an industrial expanse surrounding the downtown area. The sports and entertainment sectors of the city have a powerful influence on the city's growth. Civic and economic players have been successful in improving the environmental conditions there, envisioning the solutions to the issues in "win-win" scenarios. Cleaning up Toronto was successful because it was also viewed as good for future business.

Task forces were formed to tackle the environmental challenges that the cities faced. Differing parties sought to enact their vision in a contentious arena where players had different degrees of influence. Economic forces were prime influencers in managing environmentally progressive processes, while radical perspectives were not always welcome or considered pragmatic.

Some of the authors' conclusions include the following:

1. Each river tells its own story and this local differentiation is instructive.
2. The two pollution cases "... provide a rich basis to make the argument that ecological modernization is very much a process embedded in specific place-based policy regimes and regulation modes encountered in urban regions." (p.224)
3. "...new civil society groups that mobilize around environmental issues are decidedly different than those in earlier Fordist phases of struggle around urban ecologies." (p. 227)
4. We are now in the fourth wave of environmentalism with a justice credo, having already passed through the societal changing age of the automobile (Fordism):
5. "If the environmental justice movement can transcend the boundaries of both the traditional ecological modernization and risk society literatures and the socio-ecological demands of traditional social justice concerns, it will be an important factor in fashioning a truly urban ecological project." (p. 231).

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