

RECORD REVIEW

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Crimes Against Nature by Robert Kennedy Jr.

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Once you start reading Robert Kennedy Jr.'s "Crimes Against Nature" it's hard to stop. The 200-page saga about the systematic destruction of our environment is riveting and painfully apocalyptic. When you finish reading about how we are losing the battle to save our air and water, all you want to do is hike on a nearby wooded trail, breathing deeply to make sure the air is still decent.

Mr. Kennedy heads up the environmental organization Riverkeeper which is based in Garrison. The book is less a story of how the Bush Administration has reversed strong environmental initiatives and rendered them useless and more a story about the dangerous pitfalls in democracy. Mr. Kennedy makes clear the mantras of both the Bush and Reagan administrations were, and are, 'profits over health and safety' through 'corporate-run government.'

The anti-environmental agenda that led to the horrific air and water quality in Texas became Governor George W. Bush's blueprint for the nation. In the first chapter called "The Mess in Texas" Mr. Kennedy describes a vast land area occupied by un-regulated polluting industries that make the La Brea Tar pits seem like heaven. Generous campaign contributions from polluting companies like Alcoa, TXI, Exxon, Shell, Amoco, Enron and Dow Chemical to the Bush presidential campaign were rewarded with ineffective state (and later Federal) environmental laws that ensured profits for the corporate elite and unconsumable air and water for the public. Mr. Kennedy cites a Houston study that estimated health care costs between \$2.9 and \$3.1 billion in a city that leads the nation in childhood cancer and childhood asthma. Asthma in children yanks at Mr. Kennedy's parental heartstrings because three of his sons struggle with the disease and "on bad-air days I watch them struggle to breath."

Starting with Earth Day, 1970, an early chapter in "Crimes of Nature" recalls a growing environmental consciousness convincing enough for Washington D.C. to eventually form the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA passed 28 major laws in ten years aimed at protecting air, water, endangered species, wetlands, food safety and public lands. Regulating polluters raised the ire of industrial giants who fought to dismantle the laws that slapped billion-dollar fines standing in the way of corporate profits. Mr. Kennedy reviews the sordid resumes of appointees and legislators whose first allegiance was to the Wise Use Coalition. As Secretary of the Department of the Interior in the early 1980's James Watt sold public lands in for a 'song' saying his faith guided him to hedge against the approaching Apocalypse because "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." With Mr. Watt was the equally destructive Anne Gorsuch who as EPA's administrator "gutted the EPA's budget by 30 percent and destroyed the Superfund program at its birth. For each of the EPA's principal agencies she appointed lobbyists from paper, asbestos, chemical and oil companies. But 20 years ago Americans were relatively fresh from the Earth Day mind set and demanded Mr. Watt's removal and subsequent indictment with Ms. Gorsuch.

The 'Wise Use Coalition' was borne out of that defeat and ushered in what Mr. Kennedy calls "new monikers.... cynically chosen to imply a thoughtful approach to the environment." The duplicitous

chiaroscuro parade included groups such as ‘The Citizens for the Environment (CFE) – who fund lobbyists opposed to the Clean Air Act and The Environmental Conservation Organization – “a front group for land developers and business opposed to wetlands regulations.” The Evergreen Foundation is actually a “timber-industry mouthpiece” that pushed for ‘clear-cut logging’ as a favorable environmental practice and ‘Citizens for Sensible Control of Acid Rain’ fronts for oil and electric industries against controlling acid rain.

Players for the invigorated anti-environmental movement were Congressman Tom DeLay, the former bug exterminator who vowed to get rid of “pesky pesticide regulations” and considered DDT “safe as aspirin,” and House speaker Newt Gingrich, who authored ‘greenwashed’ language legislation to attack “big government and excessive regulations.” But the Clinton administration halted their agendas, if only temporarily. Mr. Kennedy acutely details industry’s footing in constructing the foundation for building a corporate empire.

With Dick Cheney as George W. Bush’s running mate for the 2000 election, the direction for environmental regulation became dubious. Known as a “big oil guy” and CEO of Haliburton notwithstanding, as a house representative in 1988 Mr. Cheney managed to direct President Reagan to veto a wilderness bill – the first ever in American history. When George W. was elected he knighted buddies such as former General Motors lobbyist Andrew Card chief of staff who on inauguration day “froze all pending Clinton regulations.” Gale Norton got the Department of the Interior and proceeded to sign a plan that would open 9 million acres of Alaska’s North Slope to oil and gas development, petitioned the United Nations to “remove Yellowstone from a list of endangered World Heritage sites, and proposed stripping federal protection for the endangered gray wolves, “denied endangered status to California’s spotted owl and Washington’s cut-throat trout, to list just a few. Ms. Norton’s friend J. Steven Griles, joined in the department, a former lobbyist for the mining industry. The head of the Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service was Mark Rey, a former timber-industry lobbyist and Linda Fisher, a former lobbyist for Monsanto became deputy EPA administrator. Chevron board member Condoleezza Rice was anointed as National Security Advisor.

Mr. Kennedy describes the appointees as Mr. Bush’s dream team – their dreams, our nightmares. One such nightmare became reality in 2001 when the EPA, on orders from the White House, stopped filing new cases against giant agribusiness meat farms, farms that release illegal emissions of deadly gases such as “sulfide, ammonia, methyl mercaptan, methyl sulfides, particulate matter and airborne animal allergens.” Illnesses resulting from these emissions are “severe respiratory problems, gastrointestinal diseases, eye infections, nosebleed, nausea, miscarriage and psychological problems.” The issue informs Mr. Kennedy of a “moving” experience at a press conference in Raleigh, North Carolina in 2000. He was addressing the press about a Waterkeeper Alliance lawsuit against an industrial factory farm called Smithfield Foods. The room unexpectedly filled with “weather-beaten farmers...black, white, men, women” who came to thank Mr. Kennedy and the Waterkeeper colleagues for “standing up to an industry that had bullied them for years,” and as he spoke about the “once pristine waterways of North Carolina....I was astonished to see tears flowing down so many wrinkled faces.” The experience signaled the “indifference to the cataclysmic struggle between traditional farmers and the industrial meat moguls.”

A year later the dream team dropped many prosecutions against big oil and coal companies, prosecutions started by the Clinton administration. Most noteworthy was a 97-count felony indictment against the privately held oil company, Koch Industries, whose owner Charles Koch was what Mr. Kennedy called a “Bush megadonor.” Koch was charged with releasing 90 metric tons of carcinogenic benzene at a refinery in Corpus Christi, Texas, and would have been fined up to \$352 million if Mr. Bush’s justice department hadn’t reduced the count from 97 to 9, and the “case was settled from \$20 million.” Case after case, page after page, Mr. Kennedy conjures up the

unstoppable “Wise Use” agenda and how their extensive tentacles are found in every conceivable federal environmental agency.

That indifference on the part of the federal government toward folks in northeastern counties like Westchester is evident. It is unconscionable that while New York residents have likened their recycling habits and reverence for green spaces to a second religion, the White House’s anathema belittles our efforts. That neither candidate in the 2004 presidential election has addressed America’s devastating environmental status is deeply disturbing and as Mr. Kennedy so astutely observes that “this president is allowing his corporate cronies to steal American from our children,” and probably from our children’s grandchildren.