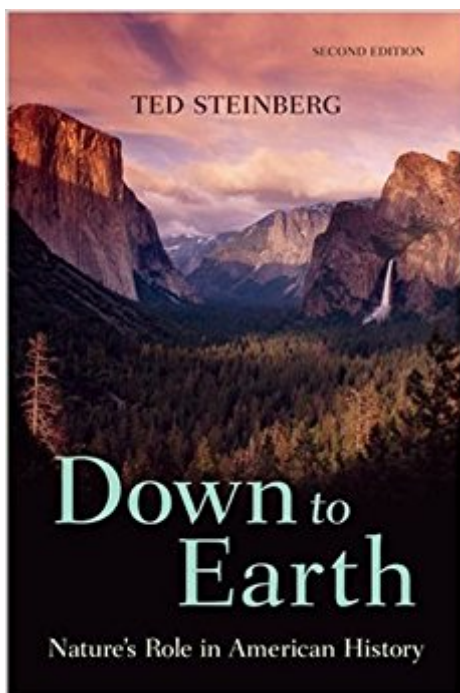


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# Down To Earth: Nature's Role In American History



## Synopsis

In this ambitious and provocative text, environmental historian Ted Steinberg offers a sweeping history of the United States--a history that, for the first time, places the environment at the very center of the narrative. Now in a new edition, *Down to Earth* reenvision the story of America "from the ground up." It reveals how focusing on plants, animals, climate, and other ecological factors can radically change the way that we think about the past. Examining such familiar topics as colonization, the industrial revolution, slavery, the Civil War, and the emergence of consumer culture, Steinberg recounts how the natural world influenced the course of human history. From the colonists' attempts to impose order on the land to modern efforts to sell the wilderness as a consumer good, he reminds readers that many critical episodes in U.S. history were, in fact, environmental events. The text highlights the ways in which Americans have attempted to reshape and control nature, from Thomas Jefferson's surveying plan, which divided the national landscape into a grid, to the transformation of animals, crops, and even water into commodities. In the second edition, Steinberg has thoroughly revised and updated the section on the twentieth century. He also introduces a timely new theme--the rise of the corporation. By addressing the ways in which nature functions in the world of big business, as well as the efforts by environmentalists to combat corporate power, Steinberg provides a richer understanding of consumerism. *Down to Earth* is ideal for courses in environmental history, environmental studies, urban studies, economic history, and American history. Passionately argued and thought provoking, this powerful text retells our nation's history with nature in the foreground--a perspective that will challenge our view of everything from Jamestown to McDonald's.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This book will try to change the way you think about American history," writes Ted Steinberg in the opening line of *Down to Earth*. That's an ambitious claim, but not far off the mark. His fascinating book is essentially an environmental history of the United States, with the author paying particular attention to how elements of nature became commodities and thereby isolated Americans from the natural world. Readers don't have to subscribe to this neo-Marxist concept in order to appreciate Steinberg's observations about everything from the old-time urban problem of horse excrement ("the nineteenth-century equivalent of auto pollution") to the massive amounts of garbage produced by fast-food chains (McDonald's, he says, requires "an area equivalent in size to more than 450,000 football fields" to supply its paper needs). He also tells what may be the first-ever natural history of the Civil War. This may sound idiosyncratic, and to some extent it is, yet Steinberg weaves it all together and makes the underappreciated point that "it is quite simply wrong to view the natural world as an unchanging backdrop to the past." It changes all the time, he writes, and it has shaped Americans in ways that few of them understand. --John Miller --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Steinberg, an environmental historian at Case Western Reserve University, examines the dynamic interactions between America's economic, political and cultural institutions and its geography, plants, animals and natural resources. He presents two predominant themes. The first is that the ecological balance is precarious and can be undermined, even completely destroyed, by unintended changes that flow from the smallest of events. The second is that the capitalist impulse to treat everything within its horizon as a commodity, and the corollary compulsion to assign a dollar value to every commodity, is fundamentally at odds with the existence of the diverse and healthy ecosystems that existed prior to the country's settlement. Steinberg makes a strong case, choosing examples that range from the environmental changes that followed the mysterious extinction of the carrier pigeon to the ecological effects of the mundane garbage disposals, lawns, highways, pesticides and even the salt spread on roads to melt snow to demonstrate his points. He is a historian with strong opinions, and in later chapters political commentary is increasingly prominent. Much of his commentary will offend conservative readers, who will disagree with Steinberg's harsh attacks on American business. For example, he chides the meatpacking industry for "corporate

slaughterhouses [that] dehumanized workers" and the biotechnology industry because "feeding the malnourished has never been the driving force behind [it]. Profits, more than people, motivated this bold new science." Interestingly, he is also critical of mainstream environmental groups, who he believes have been coopted by contributions from corporations. Steinberg (*Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*) is provocative, backing up his opinions with facts and well-honed arguments, and it will be hard to ignore his major theses. The writing is professional although occasionally stilted. 65 b&w photos, 5 maps not seen by PW. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I use this book to teach an undergraduate class in sustainability, and my students love it. It is written in a clear and accessible manner, while introducing a broad range of social and natural science concepts that have shaped American environmental history.

Perfect

Little does one realize what changes to "nature" we have and are still making that changed and are changing our Earth

Delivered on time and as advertised.

the book is very informative and interesting to read.

This book is very well written. It is set in Pre-colonial and colonial era of New England. It explains the relationship of Native Americans and the colonists with nature. It is a great combination of history and environment. It bases the foundation for environmental history.

This text provided me with insights that I would not have otherwise been as knowledgeable about or known at all.

good

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