

An Early Warning

- 1 One of the books that has done the most to alert the world to the dangers of environmental degradation is George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature*. Its message—that Western society is in the process of causing irreparable harm to the environment—greatly influenced ecologists during the beginning of the modern environmentalist movement in the 1960s. Marsh was not, however, part of this movement. Surprisingly, *Man and Nature* was first published in 1864.
- 2 Marsh first observed the environmentally destructive effects of human activities while growing up in Vermont in the early nineteenth century. The heavy demand for firewood had depleted the forests, and extensive sheep grazing had stripped the land. The result was flooding and soil erosion. Furthermore, streams were fouled by wastes dumped from numerous mills and dye houses.
- 3 Much later in his life, after careers in law, business, farming, and politics, Marsh served as ambassador to Italy. There he noticed land abuse similar to what he had seen in Vermont. Overgrazing and forest mismanagement had rendered areas that had been productive farmland since the days of the Roman Empire desolate. Marsh attributed this to what he called “man’s ignorant disregard for the laws of nature.”
- 4 In Italy, Marsh began to organize his observations and theories. He wrote in a way intended to educate readers about the impact of industrial and agricultural practices on the environment. In *Man and Nature*, he evaluated the important relationships between animals and plants, discussed forestry practices in great detail, and analyzed the ways natural water supplies are affected by human use.
- 5 *Man and Nature* challenged the popular belief that nature can heal any damage that people inflict upon it. Marsh argued that people may use and enjoy, but not destroy, the riches of the earth.
- 6 Furthermore, he asserted that everything in nature is significant and that even the tiniest organism affects the fragile environmental balance. His belief that drastic alteration of this balance would be dangerous is now accepted as a fundamental principle of modern environmental science.
- 7 Although he pointed out environmental damage caused by irresponsible human activities, Marsh did not oppose every human alteration to the environment. To him, the goal was proper management, not a return to wilderness conditions. People should consider the consequences of their actions, he wrote, and become “co-worker[s] with nature.” Marsh praised the Suez Canal, the human-made waterway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf of Aden, as “the greatest and most truly cosmopolite physical improvement ever undertaken by man.” He believed that the advantages of the canal—improved transportation and commerce—would outweigh any environmental damage. Yet he also warned of possible unintended consequences, such as destructive plants and animals spreading from one body of water to the other.
- 8 Marsh was considered a radical thinker during his lifetime. By the late nineteenth century, however, his writings, along with those of John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and others, had inspired what became known as the conservation movement. The conservationists of that time sought to educate the public that wilderness areas were worth preserving and were responsible for creating the National Park Service and the National Forest Service.