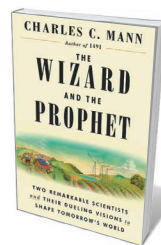


Ecologist William Vogt warned of the dangers of dwindling resources.



**The Wizard and the Prophet: Two Remarkable Scientists and Their Dueling Visions to Shape Tomorrow's World**  
CHARLES C. MANN  
Knopf: 2018.

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## SUSTAINABILITY

# Duel for the future

**Adam Rome** assesses a study of two scientists who have polarized attitudes to sustainability since the 1960s.

Our species has had an amazingly successful run. Billions of people now live in environments radically transformed to suit human needs and wants. But humanity's future is far from guaranteed. How will we meet the looming challenges of the twenty-first century? We can work even harder to master the planet with technological ingenuity. Or we might need to accept that our desires can't be unlimited, and see ourselves as citizens of a larger-than-human community, rather than as world conquerors. We can't do both, science writer Charles Mann argues in *The Wizard and the Prophet*, an effort to assess which path holds the more promise.

To dramatize the two options, Mann

contrasts the work of agronomist Norman Borlaug (the Wizard of his title) with that of ecologist William Vogt (the Prophet). In 1970, Borlaug won the Nobel Peace Prize for developing high-yield varieties of wheat that launched the Green Revolution. Along with agricultural chemicals and irrigation systems, Borlaug's seeds led to a sharp rise in productivity in Mexico, India and other developing countries, particularly in the 1960s. Vogt's 1948 best-seller *Road to Survival* warned that rising population and declining resources spelt global catastrophe. Whereas Borlaug hoped to free humanity from the constraints of nature, Vogt called for a new environmental consciousness.

Although few today would self-identify as followers of Borlaug or Vogt, the heart of Mann's book asks how people he considers their intellectual heirs propose to deal with climate change and to provide food, water and energy for a projected global population of 10 billion (or more) by 2050. His Wizard camp ranges from biotech boosters to advocates of geoengineering. His Prophets include the authors of *The Limits to Growth* (Universe, 1972), along with the small-is-beautiful advocates of organic agriculture and solar power.

The structure of *The Wizard and the Prophet* reminded me of John McPhee's brilliant *Encounters with the Archdruid* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971). That book explored the implications of the environmental movement by arranging confrontations between David Brower — long-time leader of the conservationist Sierra Club and founder of Friends of the Earth — and three presumed foes. Brower debates a mining engineer, a resort developer and a dam builder (the latter, on a raft trip on a wild stretch of the Colorado River). McPhee respected all four, and was masterful at challenging stereotypes. Readers were free to decide who had won the debates.

Unfortunately, Mann's study doesn't measure up to McPhee's classic. It is flawed in many ways, most notably in its lack of even-handedness. Mann writes that he was a Vogtian when young, later became a Borlaugian and is now torn — but I don't see that ambivalence in the text. Mann indicts Vogt as a failure who wasted precious time by leading people down a dead end. He considers Borlaug a saviour, even though the Green Revolution had unfortunate social and environmental consequences, such as a growing concentration of land ownership and pollution of waterways through overuse of pesticides. Mann also stacks the deck by ignoring problems with the Borlaugian approach and neglecting compelling elements of the Prophetic tradition.

At root, the differences between Borlaug and Vogt were ideological, not scientific. Borlaug accepted the mainstream values of his time and place — the American dream of material progress. Vogt didn't; like all prophets, he was a critic. He called for people to reappraise their place in the world: to think ecologically about everything from what we consume to how we understand history. He questioned whether "that sacred cow Free Enterprise" could be environmentally sustainable. And he advocated population