



# Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World (The Global Century Series)

By J. R. McNeill

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**Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World (The Global Century Series)** By J. R. McNeill

**"Refreshingly unpolemical and at times even witty, McNeill's book brims with carefully sifted statistics and brilliant details."?Washington Post Book World**

The history of the twentieth century is most often told through its world wars, the rise and fall of communism, or its economic upheavals. In his startling new book, J. R. McNeill gives us our first general account of what may prove to be the most significant dimension of the twentieth century: its environmental history. To a degree unprecedented in human history, we have refashioned the earth's air, water, and soil, and the biosphere of which we are a part. Based on exhaustive research, McNeill's story—a compelling blend of anecdotes, data, and shrewd analysis—never preaches: it is our definitive account. This is a volume in The Global Century Series (general editor, Paul Kennedy). 40 b/w photographs, 15 maps

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Amazon.com Review**

J.R. McNeill, a professor of history at Georgetown University, visits the annals of the past century only to return to the present with bad news: in that 100-year span, he writes, the industrialized and developing nations of the world have wrought damage to nearly every part of the globe. That much seems obvious to even the most casual reader, but what emerges, and forcefully, from McNeill's pages is just how extensive that damage has been. For example, he writes, "soil degradation in one form or another now affects one-third of the world's land surface," larger by far than the world's cultivated areas. Things are worse in some places than in others; McNeill observes that Africa is "the only continent where food production per capita declined after 1960," due to the loss of productive soil. McNeill's litany continues: the air in most of the world's cities is perilously unhealthy; the drinking water across much of the planet is growing ever more polluted; the human species is increasingly locked "in a rigid and uneasy bond with modern agriculture," which trades the promise of abundant food for the use of carcinogenic pesticides and fossil fuels.

The environmental changes of the last century, McNeill closes by saying, are on an unprecedented scale, so much so that we can scarcely begin to fathom their implications. We can, however, start to think about them, and McNeill's book is a helpful primer. --*Gregory McNamee*

### **From Publishers Weekly**

Our profligate, fossil fuel-based civilization is ecologically unsustainable and creates perpetual environmental disturbance, says Georgetown University history professor McNeill, but he remains undecided as to whether humanity has entered a genuine, full-blown ecological crisis. Nevertheless, the evidence he presents in this comprehensive, balanced survey is alarming. Soil degradation now affects one-third of earth's land surface, though intensive fertilizer use and genetic engineering of crops have masked the ill effects. From Mexico City to Calcutta, from China to Africa, megacities choke on air pollution as economic development takes priority over other concerns. Acid rain has decimated lake and river life, crops and forests across Europe and North America. International in scope, McNeill's kaleidoscopic, textbookish history hops from Soviet phosphate mining in the Arctic to deforestation by white settlers in southern Africa, documenting the pollution of oceans and seas; the unchecked "harvesting" of fish and whales; environmentally influenced, disease-producing shifts in human-microbe relations; disruptive invasions by new species (sea lampreys in the Great Lakes, rabbits in Australia); and the massive impact on ecosystems resulting from urbanization, population growth, wars, oil spills, nuclear power accidents. McNeill's study underscores the mixed consequences of environmental and political decision making. For example, the Green Revolution fed additional millions, but it also promoted monoculture and strengthened landed elites in Asia and Latin America. The book closes with a capsule history of the environmental movement, gauging its successes and influence. This scientifically informed survey makes a useful resource for environmentalists, scholars, globalists, biologists, policy makers and concerned readers. 40 photos and 15 maps not seen by PW. (Apr.)

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### **From Library Journal**

McNeill (history, Georgetown Univ.) offers a concise synthesis of humanity's relationship to and alteration of the environment during the 20th century. Divided into 12 chapters, each with a brief introduction and summary of the topics discussed therein, his volume examines Earth's lithosphere, pedosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere. McNeill interprets the human impact on the earth politically, economically, and

socially, noting that history and ecology cannot be separated, as each influenced the other. Whether it be defoliants used to fight a war in Vietnam, the construction of military-industrial complexes, or the production and consumption of consumer goods, the environmental damage was severe but not always irreversible. As a history of causes and consequences, McNeill's volume will be a welcome addition to environmental history collections and will appeal to the general reader who wants a quick overview.

*-Patricia Ann Owens, Wabash Valley Coll., Mt. Carmel, IL*

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## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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