Environmental attitudes in North America

Frank B. Golley

Frank Golley is Research Professor of Ecology at the University of Georgia, in Athens, Georgia, USA. He was President of the International Association for Ecology (INTECOL) 1986–90.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

North America has been an arena for a variety of environmental dilemmas which, while not unique, represent different problems and responses to those in Europe, Africa or Asia. North America was essentially unknown to Europeans until the end of the fifteenth century and settlement occurred relatively slowly. The Spanish explored the southern and western sections and occupied the southwest and California. The most successful settlements were by largely disaffected groups from the British Isles, with additional contingents from Germany and France and from Africa. North America has continued to receive immigrants from all parts of the world.

The initial dilemma caused by this process concerned the interaction of Europeans with the existing inhabitants of North America. After all, the continent was fully inhabited by a rich assortment of native people who practised a variety of technologies. New settlers were faced with occupying other people’s land, with developing ways to interact with the existing inhabitants and learning how to survive under new environmental conditions. This effort of adaptation was very important in the first years of settlement, but became less important as the self-confidence of the European settlers increased and in due course became replaced by a contempt, hatred and purposeful aggression against native Americans.
We will consider a case example of this phenomenon as our first environmental dilemma.

Settlement not only involved interaction with the inhabitants and owners of the land but use of the natural resources to establish European patterns of life in the New World. The continent was rich in natural resources which could be exploited by new technologies. The natural resource which was of special importance at the beginning of settlement was the forest (Lillard, 1947). Forests provided the wood for Britain’s navy, especially when access to Baltic wood was prevented, as during the first Dutch War of 1652. The King’s foresters marked great pine trees for ship masts and bent live oaks for timbers of naval vessels; special ships were constructed to take these resources to England. The forests provided much of the material and energy for the emerging American industrial revolution, and the lake states’ forests and western forests provided the lumber for expansion of settlement. Overcutting, exploitation without a reforestation plan, destruction of streams, and great wild fires were all associated with the lumber industry. Public concern at the turn of the nineteenth century led to the creation of the US Forest Service by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905, with Gifford Pinchot as chief forester. Pinchot was a utilitarian conservationist who believed that wise use of forests, not preservation, was the best policy (Pinkett, 1970). Conservationists, such as John Muir, disagreed with Pinchot’s policies (Fox, 1981). The conflict over forest management continues today and represents our second case study of an environmental dilemma.

European explorers and colonists encountered a continent that was immense, seemingly inexhaustible, and dangerous. It required hard work, technical skill and luck to succeed in the wilderness. Settlers replicated successfully European lifestyles and social organization, especially in New England, in Virginia tidewater areas and in areas settled by Germans from the Rhine Palatinate. However, the American landscape, after the revolution, gave birth to a new individual, the frontiersman or pioneer. The frontiersman became the mythical hero who opened new lands to settlement through his courage, skill and derring do. The frontiersman and his surrogates, the mountainman, the cowboy, the logger, the flatboat man, represented in an exaggerated way the characteristics Americans considered valuable and desirable.

In many cases, frontiersmen were from Ireland and Scotland on the Celtic fringe of Europe. The cultural characteristics of Celtic people were adaptive to the American frontier. Indeed, their life style and appearance was sufficiently similar to the American Indian that the Indian was interpreted to a popular audience in England, at the time of settlement, by reference to an Irishman (Quinn, 1966). Not only was personal conduct and lifestyle adaptive, the typical American crossroad with church, post office, store and mill was derived from the central settlement of Scottish