

Protecting the Planet: Environmental Champions from Conservation to Climate Change

By Budd Titlow and Mariah Tinger. 2016. Prometheus Books. 587 pages, 26.00 USD, Cloth, 11.99 USD, E-book.

A few years ago, “My Big, Fat Greek Wedding” burst onto the screen. It proved to be a very popular film. Perhaps you remember it? I’m reminded of it because *Protecting the Planet* is a big, fat American book on climate change. It deserves to be even more popular than the movie, and, hopefully, will be remembered much longer. The authors are a father-in-law/daughter-in-law team: Budd Titlow draws on an extensive background in biology as well as years of experience as a field-naturalist, writer, blogger, and teacher of related topics at Florida State University; Mariah Tinger is an educator in environmental stewardship and management and a teaching fellow in related topics at Harvard University. Their message and purpose, of course, are much more important than those of the movie – which is not to demean the movie in any way – and we will forget them at our collective peril.

The subtitle, *Environmental Champions from Conservation to Climate Change*, provides a mini-review of the contents of the book. While climate change is

the main theme and concern, the authors have chosen to provide a chronological overview of changes to the climate and biogeography of America. The book has 31 chapters organized into five parts, the first being an introduction to climate change, each of its six chapters titled in the form of a question, beginning with the definition of climate change, then its history, the how of it, proof of it, and its present-day impacts. The final chapter of Part One is a brief reply to the question, what can we do about it? This question forms a guiding theme throughout the book and receives fuller treatment in its conclusion.

Parts Two and Three cover 200 years of the US environmental movement from 1800 to today. Their potted history of America provides the substrate for the authors’ “story for the ages”, which involves numerous “heroes”, the environmentalists whose efforts are traced through the ebb and flow of environmental movements, all linked to major social, economic, and political factors. Many topics are noted in over a dozen chapters

covering decadal periods of change characterized by terms familiar to any student of American history: Manifest Destiny, the Civil War of 1849–1869, the rise of industrial America, 1870–1900, and so on. The earlier periods witnessed the growth of conservation movements, with climate change becoming an increasingly important public issue in the 1980s. Each period is characterized by a major element or overarching event that moves the environmental movement either backward or forward. The former is characterized by world events such as World War II and conservative domestic politics (the Reagan and Bush years, for example) while the latter coincides with periods of high interest in the environment, such as the 1960s, and liberal administrations. Increasingly, climate change – the developing science and the conflicting views of that science – takes centre stage. The authors recount these themes largely through the efforts of their chosen heroes and major efforts at dealing with climate change, such as the series of COP (Conference of the Parties) meetings that resulted in the Kyoto, Paris, and other agreements. Part Three ends with a brief attempt to assess the future of climate change. The authors “firmly believe that the time is ripe for climate-change solutions” to be born from “the hopeful and forceful voice of the masses...” (p. 336).

Part Four is a paean to the heroes of today, “who they are and what they have done”, in the words of this section’s subtitle. The people presented here are grouped into six chapters depending on their professions, whether scientists, advocates, politicians, artists/activists, and so on. The focus is biographical, based on interviews and personal stories, but always includes discussion of key ideas and contributions. We have met many of these people in earlier chapters; in fact, Parts Two and Three are rife with cross-references to the mentions of them in Part Four. Thus, a discussion of a scientist’s break-through research in Part Three might conclude with the statement that we will learn more about that scientist in the appropriate chapter of Part Four. The purpose of this catalogueish approach seems to be two-fold: to provide further biographical background on the hero and thereby to encourage readers to emulate their efforts or, at least, to feel some hope. The result, however, is that the book is a compendium of short pieces of information, each with its own headline. From a glass-half-empty viewpoint, this can make reading the book a bit of a slog: one gets nicely hooked into some detail, only to be told that more on this person or that event is coming up later. Very often the next short topic is not related directly, but only within the

theme of the chapter. The glass-half-full viewpoint is an appreciation of the great deal of information presented in an accessible way, introducing the reader to cleanly described ‘bites’ that can then be followed up through the copious end-notes or searches on the Internet. The authors used the Internet a great deal, judging by the notes, but also interviewed many of the people whose efforts they celebrate.

Part Five focusses, as promised, on “Finding Solutions”. The first of three chapters is optimistically titled “How the Climate-Change War Can Be Won”; it opens with a rather convoluted metaphor through which the authors assert that “climate change may just turn out to be our staunchest ally”. We’ve fouled our planetary nest and the climate is issuing its “loud wake-up call” that the time has come to clean up (p. 427). The authors call for a “grand paradigm shift” through which everyone will recognize the need to act (p. 429). They then propose that the United States is morally bound and fiscally able to lead the way and offer a series of strategies they believe are necessary for that leadership to be effective, first within the US and subsequently in the world at large. The final chapter promotes strategies for the world, some already in train, some controversial. But all rely on global cooperative efforts that seem to this reader at least to be much more difficult to accomplish than the hopeful evocation can achieve.

If you want an introduction to the topic and the key players, then this is your book. It could be useful in the classroom and profitably read by any concerned or interested person looking for a jargon-free account of the many aspects of this issue. The book has an extensive table of contents and is well indexed, features that help in navigating the book’s many chapters; its 80 pages of notes are organized by chapter number and title. The book focusses on the United States – although Canada’s Naomi Klein gets good mention – and is imbued with what seems to this reviewer to be a very American ethos, that climate change can be addressed if only we all pull together and give it our best efforts. There are moments when this seems naïve, but the authors do present myriad approaches being taken and advocated. Climate change denial cannot be denied, and the authors address it at various points, but the focus is on hope, the need for immediate action to gain future success. The dark underbelly of such optimism, however, is that if it fails to achieve its goals, we humans as a species are pretty much doomed.

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