



The World in Which We Occur: John Dewey, Pragmatist Ecology, and American Ecological Writing in the Twentieth Century

Neil W. Browne

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American philosopher John Dewey considered all human endeavors to be one with the natural world. In his writings, particularly *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey insists on the primacy of the environment in aesthetic experience. Dewey's conception of environment includes both the natural and the man-made. *The World in Which We Occur* highlights this notion in order to define "pragmatist ecology," a practice rooted in the interface of the cultural and the natural. Neil Browne finds this to be a significant feature of some of the most important ecological writing of the last century.

To fully understand human involvement in the natural world, Browne argues that disciplinary boundaries must be opened, with profound implications for the practice of democracy. The degradation of the physical environment and democratic decay, for Browne, are rooted in the same problem: our persistent belief that humans are somehow separate from their physical environment.

Browne probes the work of a number of major American writers through the lens of Dewey's philosophy. Among other texts examined are John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911); *Sea of Cortez* (1941) by John Steinbeck and Edward Ricketts; Rachel Carson's three books about the sea, *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), *The Sea Around Us* (1951), and *The Edge of the Sea* (1955); John Haines's *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* (1989); Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986); and Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* (1991). Together, these texts—with their combinations of scientific observation and personal meditation—challenge the dichotomies that we have become accustomed and affirm the principles of a pragmatist ecology, one in which ecological and democratic

values go hand in hand.



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