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## Book Review

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David L. McConnell and Marilyn D. Loveless, *Nature and the Environment in Amish Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), xiv+294 pp., \$49.95 (pbk), ISBN: 9781421426167.

*Nature and the Environment in Amish Life* presents a nuanced view of Amish environmental practices based on extensive research and experience. It doesn't fall into the trap of objectifying the Amish lifestyle as ecological; nor does it dismiss their positive contributions. McConnell has written other books about Amish life, while Loveless brings ecological knowledge. Both teach at the College of Wooster, which is in a heavily settled Amish region. They are essentially writing about their neighbors, with the accountability that such an endeavor entails. They locate their study within the field of political ecology, which they understand to be the interdisciplinary theoretical framework 'which examines the natural world as the site of a confluence of powerful political, economic, and sociological forces' (p. 12). They critically engage the stereotype of the 'ecological Amish', arguing that it says more about the dominant American culture than it does about actual Amish communities (p. 3).

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, 'Growing up Rural', articulates the worldview in which Amish children are raised and how this influences the ecological impact of Amish households. From a young age, Amish children are surrounded by the natural world, spending a great deal of time outdoors with older family members in a variety of agricultural tasks. They also learn from an early age that nature is a resource to be exploited, and that the earth was created for 'the benefit of humans' (p. 29). The authors ask how these worldviews influence the actual ecological footprint of Amish families, noting importantly that 'in the end, the size of your ecological footprint depends only on the choices you make, not the reasons why you make them' (p. 43). Amish communities have several important things going for them when it comes to minimizing resource use. They use far less gasoline-powered transportation than non-Amish and they grow, hunt, or gather a great deal of the food they consume, which also cuts down on fossil fuel consumption used to bring food to market, sometimes from thousands of miles away (p. 57). The authors found based on their survey data that Amish groups do have a lower per capita carbon impact than their non-Amish neighbors, with the more conservative affiliations having the lowest carbon impact and New Order Amish approaching the carbon impact of their non-Amish neighbors (p. 64).

The second part, 'Working with Nature', explores how Amish agriculture, animal breeding, and forestry impact their environment. One of the most surprising findings of their study was the great extent to which Amish farms rely on cutting-edge

technology in GMO seeds and fertilizer use. The authors explain that this greater acceptance of agricultural technology is due to a belief that the farm should be as profitable as possible, and that these kinds of technology do not have a negative impact on family life (p. 74). On the other hand, Amish have been able to keep their small-holding farms profitable in a time when agribusiness is increasingly reliant on large farms. The authors note, 'Amish agriculture stands out as one of the only examples of traditional, small-scale farming that remains economically sound in the temperate zone of the world' (p. 71). The organic movement is on the rise, primarily catering to high-end restaurants and grocery stores, and is motivated by a combination of increased profit and personal and environmental health (p. 78).

In part three, 'Reconfiguring Leisure and the Outdoors', the authors address outdoor pursuits such as gardening, nature writing, hunting, and birdwatching. Though farming has dramatically declined as a primary source of income, gardening has continued to be a main feature of Amish life. The authors write, 'from the day they first toddle behind their mother in the bean rows until their hands can no longer hold a trowel, gardening is part of the backdrop of Amish life' (p. 127). As they address in earlier chapters, Amish families grow a majority of the produce they consume in home gardens, canning and preserving food for all seasons. Hunting and fishing further supplement the Amish diet, and have increased in popularity since the rise of shop work as the dominant profession (p. 146).

The last part, 'The Amish as Environmentalists', discusses how Amish communities respond to local environmental issues and their perspectives on ecology and human relationships with nature. They found that most Amish have a highly localized view of environmental impact. They often express incredulity that their farming practices could have an impact on regional watersheds far downstream, in the case of Lancaster farmers impacting the Chesapeake Bay (p. 191). Many Amish are skeptical of environmentalists, the EPA, and climate change, but they can be motivated to make changes especially when the impact is visible, such as a creek polluted by cow manure or a loss of topsoil (p. 192).

The following statement provides an excellent summary of the findings of the authors:

In many ways, then, the Amish are parochial stewards of nature. In their emphasis on localness they embody a place-based closeness to nature that many environmentalists affirm, and their comparatively low rates of consumption mean that they demand less of the earth's resources. But the Amish diverge from ecological ideals in that their avowedly inward focus typically leads them to dismiss the idea that human actions can have a cumulatively negative impact on the global ecosystem. (p. 223)

In this respect it is important to compare the benefit of intentions versus outcomes. Talk is cheap when it comes to addressing the ecological disaster of climate change, and 'Amish restrictions, though not undertaken with ecological intent, represent a collective attempt to value family and community life above material things' (p. 233). This is a needed addition to the growing body of literature on Anabaptist environmentalism and a valuable contribution to the field of religion and nature. The Amish are often stereotyped, in both positive and negative ways, and this book moves beyond the caricature of the ecological Amish to ask how Amish themselves view

their relationship with the natural world. The authors also ask us non-Amish to examine why these stereotypes have been so pervasive in dominant culture and what we might learn about our own habits from the practices of Amish communities.

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