



Viktor Pál, Tuomas Räsänen, Mikko Saikku, eds. *Green Development or Greenwashing? Environmental Histories of Finland*. Wiltshire: White Horse Press, 2023. 239 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-912186-76-1.

Reviewed by Peder Anker (New York University)

Published on H-Environment (December, 2023)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Finland is the greenest country on earth, according to the Environmental Performance Index prepared by NASA's Socioeconomic Data and Application Center at Columbia University. Finland outperforms other nations on issues ranging from climate change mitigation and ecosystem vitality, to air quality, environmental health, and more. This is surely impressive. And as a consequence, all environmental eyes are on Finland. How did they do it? The Finns themselves are naturally proud, though this anthology goes beyond national satisfaction for a reality check. Is it truly green development or is it just the greenwashing of a nation? Unsurprisingly, the answer is a bit of both, but along the way, I learned a lot about Finland's relationship to the natural world and themselves. For better or worse, we all have something to learn from what they have been doing.

Finland has a vibrant environmental history community that has produced a long series of publications over several decades. The present anthology captures the activity well, with all sixteen contributors having Finnish (or also Sámi) heritage or working in Finnish academic institutions. Finland, it is worth recalling, is one of the Nordic countries, and it is known for its extensive boreal forests and nearly 188,000 lakes. Its northern location results in harsh, snowy winters and brief, warm summers with significant variations in day-

light—experiencing the midnight sun in summer and very short days in winter. The terrain is a rugged landscape shaped by glaciers with rich mineral soils. Its vast forests are predominantly pine, spruce, and birch, providing habitat for a rich biodiversity, including brown bears, wolves, lynxes, and reindeer, particularly in the northern regions inhabited by the indigenous Sámi people. The coastline features one of the world's largest archipelagos. Environmental policies prioritize sustainability and protection, with a strong focus on renewable energy and carbon neutrality ambitions. Finland's national parks and conservation areas safeguard its natural habitats and demonstrate a cultural reverence for nature. The environmental quality, from urban centers to wilderness areas, reflects the country's commitment to ecological stewardship, making Finland, according to the Environmental Performance Index, an exemplar in balancing human activity with natural preservation.

The environmental historians in this anthology provide nuance, perspectives, and food for thought to the prevailing view. Jaana Laine explains in her well-researched essay, "Knowledge of Trees and Forests: Finnish Forest Research from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century," that forests and their use have changed over time, with the industrial production of timber being particu-

larly problematic. More recently, many trees have been marked by anthropogenic global warming, she explains, which encourages bark beetles to chew up spruce trees. The changing status of birch trees in Finnish forests is the topic of an equally interesting essay by Seija A. Niemi. From being an excellent source of firewood to the key ingredient in plywood, famously used in the designer Alvar Aalto's Paimio-chair, birch has served different purposes within various social layers of Finnish society.

Many different animals live in these forests, of course, and Heta Lähdesmäki does a nice job depicting how wolves became a symbol of wilderness in Finland, with social tensions arising between those who endorse and those who oppose living with these animals in the wild. Tuomas Räsänen delivers an equally interesting piece depicting how Finns have treated endangered animals in the twentieth century, first seeking to eradicate them while gradually moving toward protection programs. A particularly innovative essay on the topic of wildlife is signed off by Mauri Soikkanen and Simo Laakkonen who discuss the impact of the Finnish army during the Second World War. Not only was the war devastating to the country with the loss of East Karelia to the Soviets, they argue, but all the hunting and fishing to provide food for the soldiers also devastated wildlife along the front line. Yet behind the front line things looked different, with hunters having left for soldiering and thus, to a certain extent, leaving wildlife alone. The current war between Russia and Ukraine came to mind in reading this essay, as it raised the important issue of the environmental impacts of warfare.

Some of the most interesting essays in this volume address the Sámi people, who tend to live in the northern part of the country. "Cultural Nature in Mid-Lappish Reindeer Herding Communities," authored by Maria Lähteenmäki, Oona Ilmolahti, Outi Manninen, and Sari Stark, stands out. Basing their study on both surveys and histor-

ical sources, they explain the close interaction between nature and social codes in Sámi culture. Yet they avoid stereotypes of the Sámi people as nature protectors. "The members of the reindeer herding communities," they explain, "have identified themselves as nature protectors, but at the same time want to distinguish between themselves and the green 'daydreamers of the South,' who have no practical knowledge of living with nature" (pp. 112-13). This is an apt reminder of not romanticizing indigenous people as born environmentalists. Jukka Nyysönen provides further evidence and nuance to this argument in his historical analysis of how the Sámi have been involved in the planning and management of nature protection.

In these discussions, I could not help wondering why words like "Lapp," "Lapland," and "lappish" are used in the anthology. The Finnish word "lapp" could simply mean "periphery" (or so my internet search tells me), but it can also be an insult in the vein of Middle High German in which "lappe" means "being a simpleton" or in Swedish and Norwegian where "lapp" means "patch" as in being so poor as to patch clothes. In any case, the Sámi population in Norway, where I'm from, finds these words deeply offensive, and *The New World Encyclopedia* advises against using the word in English. Perhaps the Sámi in Finland experience these words differently? To be fair, the essays are all written with deep respect for the Sámi cultures and history, so the use of this language might just reflect Nordic variances in words only.

The interesting history of the Finnish Green Party is the topic of Risto-Matti Matero's essay, and he tells a story of how the party evolved from embarking on the social movement of radical environmental ideals of the 1980s. With the end of the Cold War, it transformed into a green economic growth party promoting green consumerism. Matti O. Hannikainen discusses in his essay how the consumerist culture created problems for the fishing industry. At the same time, Janne Mäkir-

anta traces one of the origins of environmentalism in Finland to activism against toxic air in urban environments.

In our shared efforts to improve environmental living, it is important to have role models to guide us forward. Equally important is self-scrutiny by those who harbor those ideals. This volume is a solid contribution to that questioning, and it's done so by a fine group of Finnish environmental historians. The volume does not celebrate the nation's environmental policies, though between the lines one cannot help but notice a sense of pride in their nation's nature and achievements in terms of environmental politics. This fine volume has found a good balance between pointing to what's right while avoiding the pitfalls of brute environmental iconoclasm. It serves as a valuable contribution to understanding Finland's environmental policies and practices.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Peder Anker. Review of Pál, Viktor; Räsänen, Tuomas; Saikku, Mikko, eds, *Green Development or Greenwashing? Environmental Histories of Finland*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. December, 2023.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59993>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.