

Environmental Values in American Culture



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in American Culture

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How do Americans view environmental issues? From EarthFirst! members to sawmill workers, this study by a team of cognitive anthropologists offers both good and bad news for those addressing environmental issues in the public arena. On the one hand it reveals surprising similarities in the way different groups of Americans view long-term global environmental change, and on the other it shows that Americans have serious misunderstandings about these issues, which skews public support for policies. Using research techniques developed in the study of other cultures, *Environmental Values in American Culture* explores the reasons for the recent increase in environmental sentiments among Americans, and shows that current views attributing public environmentalism to a single cause are greatly oversimplified. It investigates the components of public environmentalism: beliefs (what people think the world is like), values (what is moral or desirable), and cultural models (the organization of beliefs or values into explanations or justifications). The authors document how scientific information on such issues as global warming, ozone depletion, and species extinctions is interpreted and transformed by the public, and how underlying beliefs and values influence preferences for or against environmental policies. The interviews with and surveys of groups such as EarthFirst!, Sierra Club members, the general public, congressional staff, coal miners, and sawmill workers yield rich insights about how people conceptualize - and misconceptualize - major environmental issues. They also reveal public beliefs and values that differ sharply from those of environmental scientists and economists, identify what is shared by Americans and what is idiosyncratic to extreme groups, and show that religious and spiritual values concerning the environment and concerns for one's descendants are as important as economic tradeoffs.

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目录:

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